
Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, *Race Sounds. The Art of Listening in African American Literature*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12134>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Charles Joseph, « Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, *Race Sounds. The Art of Listening in African American Literature* », *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2018, Online since 01 September 2019, connection on 09 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12134>

This text was automatically generated on 9 October 2019.



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Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, *Race Sounds. The Art of Listening in African American Literature*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2018, 206 pages, \$ 85, ISBN : 1609385616

- 1 The realm of orality has held a more and more important place in the study of literature. This analytical prism of hearing first broke ground back in 1956 with poetry and Laurence Perrine's seminal *Sound and Sense*, and even though the field of research dedicated to the relationship between poetry and sound has remained active over the years with titles such as *Sound as Sense* (Eds. Michel Delville and Christine Pagnouille) or *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound* (Eds. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin), sound is no longer strictly attached to this literary format. Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) has promoted new pathways to listen more closely to what is first intended to be read, and other fields of research like translation have also tackled this subject. Acoustics have thus developed outside of physics and new approaches have fueled what is now recognized as sound studies : *Orality : The Power of the Spoken Word* (Graham Furniss, 2004), *The Sound Studies Reader* (Ed. Jonathan Sterne, 2012), *The Ethnography of Rhythm : Orality and Its Technologies* (Haun Saussy, 2016), *Human and Machine Hearing : Extracting Meaning from Sound* (Richard F. Lyon, 2017), *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (Ed. Michael Bull, 2018), *Remapping Sound Studies* (Eds. Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes, 2019), etc.
- 2 It should be noted that many studies conducted through the prism of sound have also focused on the African diaspora, and over the past decade or so, several monographs have showcased this strong interest : *Speaking Power : Black Feminist Orality in Women's*

Narratives of Slavery (DoVeanna S. Fulton, 2006), *The Sounds of Slavery : Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Shane White, 2006), *Multimodality in Canadian Black Feminist Writing : Orality and the Body in the Work of Harris, Philip, Allen, and Brand* (Maria Caridad Casas, 2009), *Anthem : Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (Shana L. Redmond, 2013), *Imagine the Sound : Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights* (Carter Mathes, 2015), *Enduring Truth : Restoring Sound Theology and Relevance to African American Preaching* (Aaron E. Lavender, 2016), etc. In *Race Sounds*, Nicole Brittingham Furlonge positions herself at the crossroads of these movements that have punctuated the development of sound studies and offers a detailed and comprehensive epistemological insight into how sound studies and African American literature can be articulated today. Divided into five chapters, the monograph aims to “understand how listening functions to perceive and interpret bodies, ideas, and aesthetics of race, gender, and class differences” (2).

- 3 Entitled ““Attuned to it All” : Embodied Listening and Listening in Print”, Brittingham Furlonge’s introduction frames the key notions that she will discuss throughout the monograph and explains very clearly how attentive, relational and deliberate listening practices are at the core of the “modes of oral engagement” debated throughout *Race Sounds*. Brittingham Furlonge thus argues that “by being aurally attentive to these dynamics”, the contemporary writers, artists, and intellectuals selected in *Race Sounds* “explore the lower frequencies of representation, considering the ways in which aural perception can tell alternative stories and amplify sound and difference in new ways” (2). Brittingham Furlonge insists that while the study is strongly set in interdisciplinarity, *Race Sounds* is first and foremost about listening in print through texts that “activate listening as a dynamic aural practice of cultural, political, and intellectual engagement” (6). Relying notably on Josh Kun’s *Audiotopia* (2005), Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies* (2005) and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening* (2007), she argues that we now need to become attuned in order to shift from the emphasis on sounding to “an attention to listening practices” so that we might consider listening “as an aural form of agency, a practice of citizenship, [...] an ethics of community building, a mode of social and political action, a set of cultural strategies for cultural revision, and a practice of historical building” (10). Illustrating her point, Brittingham Furlonge focuses on Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight : Los Angeles 1992* (1994), a play in which the actress successively performs testimonies that she had gathered in Los Angeles about the 1992 South Central riots. In *Twilight*, Smith’s primary work was to perform listening itself and it thus exemplifies the “complex and situational practices of listening” that the author will delve into in *Race Sounds*.
- 4 The first chapter entitled ““Our Literary Audience’ : Listenership in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Sterling Brown’s ‘Ma Rainey’” examines how Hurston’s and Brown’s texts have modeled listening practices through their writing, and how these listening practices are all related to the Harlem Renaissance and the development of the African American literary scene. After analyzing Zora Neale Hurston’s “ethnographic listening” (21), Brittingham Furlonge focuses on a more specific character analysis with Phoeby’s role in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a peculiar modulization of listening and aurality, before considering the wider critical and cultural politics of listening that she identifies in Hurston’s novel. Brittingham Furlonge then shifts to Sterling Brown’s work, arguing that one of the poet’s strongest legacies was to make a call for a black listenership throughout his career, using his

poem “Ma Rainey” and Brown’s extensive use of the vernacular to show how he successfully modeled listernership (19) in his work.

- 5 Chapter two, “‘To Hear the Silence of Sound’: Vibrational Listening in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” centers on Ellison’s metaphorical representation of segregation, as *Invisible Man* longs more “specifically for a sonic confirmation of existence” (41) after explaining how his invisibility has become more and more strenuous on his psyche. Brittingham Furlonge first discusses how Ellison listened for “cultural fidelity” (42) by focusing on his essay “Living with Music” in which Ellison describes his writing experience of *Invisible Man* and the influence his sonic environment had on the novel’s narrative. She then focuses on the novel itself and reflects first upon the role that sensory perception plays in the novel with *Invisible Man*’s “listening body” (45) and its vibrational capacities as both receptor and transmitter, but she also considers how sound technology played an equally important role in the construction of the narrative, particularly the phonograph, the microphone and the tape recorder. Brittingham Furlonge aptly concludes this chapter by arguing that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* offers a “cultural politics of frequency” (55) in addition to convincingly demonstrating how the novel’s narrator is himself is one of the first literary characters to engage actively in what she describes as “ethical listening” (56).
- 6 The third chapter entitled “When Malindy Listens: Audiographic Archiving in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” presents another case study centered this time on Gayl Jones’ first novel, interrogating “what different understandings emerge when we think of the black woman vocalist as a listener to her self?” (16). Titled after Farah Jasmine Griffin’s essay “When Malindy Sings”, Brittingham Furlonge insists upon the “catalytic, generative and constructive process” (59) of listening, processes that she identifies as deeply rooted within the novel’s multiple references to enslavement, defining first the novel’s “storytellers and storyhearers in the flesh” (60) but also how these processes became essential in order to cope with “listening to loss” (64). Brittingham Furlonge then addresses the introspective role that listening acquires in *Corregidora* and how vocalization and singing are inextricably embedded in nostalgia and at times melancholia. Brittingham Furlonge concludes this case study by putting it cleverly into perspective with two world-famous songs, Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” and Bettye LaVette’s “Blackbird”.
- 7 Chapter four, “‘If I allow Myself to Listen’: Slavery, Historical Thinking, and Aural Encounters in David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*” is the last chapter of *Race Sounds* to deal with a case study. As with *Corregidora*, slavery holds an important place in this chapter, yet here, Brittingham Furlonge’s interest lies in how Bradley’s narrator, a social historian, questions how listening practices can relate to the work of the historian. In a first part entitled “Listening for a Sound (Hi)Story”, Brittingham Furlonge reviews several literary works that revolve around slavery and apprehend it with the intention to revisit (if not reinvent) some of its history. She ponders upon this process and how this approach to slavery “often entails listening as a mode of fictional expression, representation and historical recasting of black subjectivity” (83). She then focuses on *The Chaneysville Incident*’s narrator, John Washington and how he evolves throughout the novel. First resisting listening as a mode of historical research, Washington undergoes an aural apprenticeship that teaches him that listening can in fact be used as a site of negotiation between past and present. Finally, Brittingham Furlonge skillfully demonstrates how *The Chaneysville Incident* presents listening as a

spatial, cultural and contested practice that ultimately serves the book's objective, to position "readers as ongoing listeners, desiring to know while simultaneously acknowledging that a complete knowing is impossible" (106).

- 8 The fifth chapter is shorter in length, but is however a much-appreciated addition to the monograph. Entitled "'New Ways to Make Us Listen': Aural Learning in the English Classroom", Brittingham Furlonge constructed this final chapter as a sort of pedagogical introspection in order to share with her academic readers how listening can also be implemented in class as a teaching practice. She here draws from personal experiences in the classroom and offers meaningful and practical ways to include listening as a pedagogical tool. She also shares in detail an interdisciplinary curriculum for one of her English courses, one that aims for her students "to experience how listening enhances their engagement with the written word and to develop ways in which their aurally inflected reading practices can unmute words in print" (109). The book ends with a short afterword entitled "'All Living is Listening': Toward an Aurally Engaged Citizenry" in which Brittingham Furlonge beautifully interweaves the epigraph selected for *Race Sounds* consisting of two verses from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) with Barack Obama's final speech as President of the United States, calling "for a democratic listening" (120).
- 9 The vast bibliography lists more than 250 references covering sound studies, African American studies as well as literature, thus showing the wide specter that Brittingham Furlonge had to cover in order to deliver strong demonstrations. We can regret that Jennifer Ryan's *Post-Jazz Poetics: A Social History* (2010) was not included in the book's analytical process as it would have reinforced even further the porousness of the different fields of research discussed in *Race Sounds*. We can also deplore the absence of the African griot tradition in the fifth chapter ; and an exploration of the current status of African American Vernacular English in American society and popular culture would have also strengthened Brittingham Furlonge's argument regarding the repeated use of the vernacular in several case studies. *Race Sounds. The Art of Listening in African American Literature* offers however a truly compelling read and an insightful dive into an innovative venture where literature, sociology, race and sound intersect.

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Subjects: Recensions

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